

Remembering the Holocaust

We ignore the lessons at our peril

By Warren L. Miller
and Tom Lantos

In Iran, the Islamic government recently sponsored a conference denying the Holocaust. In Slovakia, a Catholic archbishop has said that the period from 1939 through 1945 — when 70,000 Slovakian Jews were sent to death camps — was a period of “well-being” for the country. In Ukraine, an American Jewish survivor of the Holocaust restored a Jewish cemetery in the town of his childhood. A local mob put up three huge crosses on the cemetery six years ago — and they are still there.

Across the globe, the historical record of the Holocaust — the planned genocide of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II — is under attack. Despite mountains of evidence — death camps and mass graves, records collected by the Nazis, thousands of interviews with survivors — the deniers continue their campaign to erase or to blur history.

Some have stood against this tide — Emory University’s Deborah Lipstadt famously stood trial

for libel against a Holocaust denier and she won. But not everyone must follow this example of courage.

Taking back the memory of the Holocaust is sometimes as simple as preserving a synagogue in a European village. It could also mean putting a memorial in the town square, noting the Jewish community that once lived there. Or it may involve promoting Holocaust education in European nations.

Those kinds of actions are central to the mission of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad, which Congress established to protect the cultural and historical legacy of the thousands of communities that were wiped out by the Holocaust.

The commission is far more than an agency devoted to historical preservation. It is often engaged in diplomacy. Because so much of Europe was held under Communist domination for decades, many nations have never come to grips with their involvement in the Holocaust. Moreover, some of those nations have lionized anti-Communists who also had troubling links to Nazi occupiers.

So the commission, its support-

ers in the Congress and multiple presidential administrations have pursued a broad diplomatic strategy to help these nations appreciate the Holocaust’s special significance, particularly what happened in their own countries.

This effort has borne fruit: In Romania, where President Ion Iliescu once stated that “there was no Holocaust in Romania,” Elie Wiesel was appointed to lead a truth commission; in Kielce, Poland, site of the worst postwar pogrom, a memorial was dedicated last summer in the town square; in Daugavpils, Latvia, well-wishers including the nation’s president, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, came last April to rededicate the town’s lone remaining synagogue, one of only two in Latvia to survive the war.

In the past five years 17 bilateral agreements have been concluded to protect and preserve sites with Germany, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and others. Because of our efforts, we have seen increased support for historic preservation, the more vigorous investigation and prosecution of hate crimes and a greater willingness by governments to speak out against attacks on cultural mi-

norities.

The work is not just for the dead. It is also for the living. Each nation that has taken up this cause has found the process useful, because remembering shameful events, along with the proud moments, is the hard work of any free society.

In fact, the way the Holocaust is remembered is a good indicator of the health of any society and nation. Where the Holocaust is denied and truth is under assault, so too is freedom, and so too is humanity.

We must remember that during the Holocaust, there were six million individuals killed in six million individual acts of murder. Each victim must be remembered as we would a loved one, even if the bones of the martyred were never buried, their families destroyed with them and all memories of their communities, their homes, the lives they once lived were gone in an instant.

We have the moral obligation to restore and to remember as much as we can of that world, because ultimately, it is the least we can do.

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